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ABSTRACT

Early childhood programs should be designed to serve the whole child's development within the context of the family and community. This is especially important for children who speak a language other than English at home. Programs must employ developmentally and culturally appropriate practices that respect individual differences and choices and that incorporate the family and home culture. Research points to the benefits of a cognitive/developmental approach that fosters not only intellectual learning, but also physical, social, and emotional learning. This approach is particularly appropriate for language minority children. Experiences are provided in environments that accept each child's individual development. Because developmental milestones and expectations vary from culture to culture, early childhood educators need to understand the cultural values of families and their goals for socialization, beliefs about the nature of the child, and child-rearing techniques. Teachers need to recognize developmentally equivalent milestones and patterns of behavior, use interactive styles familiar to the child, reinforce family values that promote learning, and deal directly with differences in cultural patterns between home and school. Parents should be consulted about every aspect of their children's program. Training in cross-cultural communication and in promoting positive home-school-community relationships should be included in all staff training for early childhood educators. (JR)

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ERIC Digest

# Early Childhood Programs for Language Minority Students

Prepared by Helen Nissani, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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Digest

April 1993

# Early Childhood Programs for Language Minority Students

(EDO-FL-93-03)

*Prepared by Helen Nissani, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory*

Parents are the primary teachers of young children. Bowman (1989) points out that "children are taught to act, believe and feel in ways that are consistent with the mores of their communities" (p.119). To promote the healthy self-esteem of each and every young child, early childhood education programs must be thoughtfully designed to serve both parents and children—all the more so for those who speak a language other than English at home.

Kagan (1989) suggests that we should design programs that serve the whole child's development—social/emotional, physical, and cognitive—within the context of the family and community. These programs must employ developmentally appropriate practices that respect individual differences and choices and that recognize the individual child's development. They must also incorporate the family and home culture and make the parents an integral part of the program. To achieve these goals, programs must develop staff who are thoroughly familiar with early childhood development, skilled at interacting with parents and the community, and sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

This Digest will discuss the following components of effective early childhood programs for language minority children: developmentally and culturally appropriate practices, parent involvement, and staff training and development.

## Developmentally Appropriate Practices

*The cognitive/developmental approach.* Current research in early childhood education clearly points to the benefits of a cognitive/developmental approach, which assumes that young children "learn naturally and casually as they live their lives, and that play . . . is valuable learning" (Greenberg, 1990, p. 72). This learning goes on developmentally as the child matures. Intellectual learning is fostered but not given priority over physical, social, and emotional learning. Self-discipline is encouraged as is self-esteem. In a cognitive/developmental approach, children are encouraged to become involved in purposeful and creative activities with other children, to make major choices among hands-on learning activities, to initiate and accomplish self-motivated tasks within a rich environment, and to construct knowledge at their own individual pace by discovering and engaging in open-ended activities that reflect all areas of their development while dialoguing with supportive adults. Developmental programs are designed to meet all the needs of young children and provide programming that is personally meaningful to each and every child within the context of the child's culture, primary language, and family.

The developmental approach to planning programs for young children is especially appropriate for language minority children. There are no preconceived notions as to the correct method of interaction with materials. Experiences in art, music, small and gross motor activities, along with language arts, are provided in environments that accept each child's individual development and encourage each child to interact purposefully with and extract meaning from these experiences. Each child is valued as an individual learner. All children are regarded as capable of learning, and each child's learning style, cultural point of reference, and language are valued. Well designed developmental early childhood programs enhance the self-esteem of the young language minority child.

*Serving the whole child within the context of the family and community.* To ensure the success of all young language minority children in developmental settings, educators need to create learning environments that are culturally and linguistically relevant. The Head Start Multicultural Task Force (1989) notes that "multicultural programming incorporates approaches that validate and build upon the culture and strengths of the child and family" (p. 1). This approach requires that educators examine their own expectations and biases as well as incorporate materials and activities that have special relevance to the children. According to Ramsey (1982), "the goal is not to teach children about [different] cultures but rather to help children become accustomed to the idea that there may be many life styles, languages, and points of view" (p. 200). The family is the group of greatest importance to young children (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989). Multicultural educational experiences validate each child's family and thus promote healthy self-concepts.

Differences in culture between home and school are not the only issue in the case of children from homes where English is not spoken. Ideally, educators should speak the home language of the children in order to assist more effectively in their development. As Bowman (1989) points out, "Learning a primary language is a developmental milestone for young children and is, therefore, a 'developmentally appropriate' educational objective."

## Culturally Appropriate Practices

Cultural diversity makes it difficult to assess each child's developmental status in each area of development. Recent research (e.g., Edwards & Gandini, 1989) has shown that developmental milestones and expectations vary from culture to culture. In order to design appropriate programs for language minority children, educators need to understand not only the values of a specific culture but the goals for socialization, beliefs about the nature of the child, and various child-rearing techniques.

Bowman (1989) asks whether it is possible to design a developmentally appropriate curriculum for a program that includes children from diverse cultures who do not speak the same language. Given that children do not all develop in the same way, Bowman concludes that the same curriculum cannot be used for all children.

However, it is possible to develop a conceptual framework that a culturally sensitive teacher might follow. Bowman (1990) suggests the following points that teachers should consider.

*Developmentally equivalent patterns of behavior should be recognized.* All children learn similar things: for example, language, systems of categorization, and interpersonal communication styles. Although these accomplishments may appear quite different, they can also be seen as developmentally equivalent.

*All equivalent developmental milestones should be given the same value.* For example, how well a young child speaks her own language may be more important than how well she speaks English.

*Interactive styles familiar to the child should be used, including using the child's home language.* Many educators see preschool programs as an opportunity to promote rapid acquisition of English. This is at variance with the whole idea of developmentally appropriate practices. Children at the age of 3 and 4 are still in the process of developing their first language. Wong-Fillmore (in press) suggests that young children who rapidly learn their second language may do so at the cost of losing interest and ability in their first or home language. The first language is the primary mode of communication between young children and their parents. Children are socialized to take part in their home and community through the home language.

*Family values that promote learning should be reinforced.* Program goals should be explained to parents so they can cooperate and foster a positive attitude toward achievement in school.

*Differences between home and school cultural patterns must be dealt with directly.* Teachers, as well as parents, have to become aware of possible discrepancies between home and school cultures. Language minority children may often find themselves trying to respond to conflicting home and school cultural expectations. Young Hispanic children may be expected to be quiet around adults at home but to "speak up" to the teacher in the classroom.

*It should be recognized that the same content may have different meaning to different groups of children.* Bears are often portrayed as benign creatures in stories for children, but in Navajo culture, bears are usually depicted as wicked creatures. A story about Smokey the Bear might be understood by Navajo children differently from the way non-Navajo children understand it. This can result in confusion for the Navajo children and frustration on the part of the teacher. Alternate stories might have to be considered.

## The Role of Parents

According to leading researchers in school and family issues, the key factor in a child's academic success is the parent (Olsen, 1990). "Many kinds of development in social, psychological, emotional, moral, linguistic, and cognitive areas are critical to academic learning. The attitudes, values, and behavior of the family and its social network strongly affect such development" (Comer, 1980, p. 22). Therefore, the home and school should work together and support one another in the job of nurturing and educating young children. The family should not only be consulted as programs for young children are designed, but provisions to involve the parents in every aspect of these programs should be mandatory.

The importance of good cross-cultural communication cannot be overemphasized. The goals, aspirations, cultural mores, and values of each family must be respected by early childhood practitioners. Language assessments, developmental screenings, and other evaluations and planning sessions should not be carried out without input from the parents. Through both informal and formal contacts with parents, educators can become familiar with individual cultures, values, and practices.

## Staff Training and Development

All early childhood educators need to be thoroughly familiar with early childhood practices and philosophy to implement effective programs. In addition, educators working with young language minority children need to be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of these children.

Staff development training should include hands-on experiences with appropriate practices, concrete examples illustrating the design of various models of early childhood programs, and imaginative activities designed to assist teachers in the creation of the program, curriculum, and learning environment. Strategies to promote positive home-school-community relationships should be included in inservice training for all early childhood educators. Also, training in cross-cultural communication will help practitioners interact with language minority children and their families.

## Conclusion

The language minority family requires services that strengthen the family so that it may nurture and support the development of healthy, competent young children. Comprehensive developmental early childhood programs can be designed to meet these family needs. Programs can and should be developed in such a manner that parents are respected and are actively involved.

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